

[Forty Fathoms]

Copy - 1 Belief and Customs - Folkstuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview 12

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Saul Levitt

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace

DATE February 7, 1939

SUBJECT Maritime - FORTY FATHOMS

1. Date and time of interview February 5, 1939

2. Place of interview

3. Name and address of informant

Victor Campbell 25 South Street New York City

(Known as "Forty Fathoms")

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant. David Silver,
James Allen

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5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Saul Levitt

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace

DATE February 7, 1939

SUBJECT Maritime - FORTY FATHOMS

1. Ancestry Scotch-Irish-French

2. Place and date of birth Nova Scotia, 1890

3. Family

4. Places lived, in, with dates Nova Scotia until eighteen; then sailor from Nova Scotia and other Canadian ports; has sailed from New York. No steady residence. Has been in New York since 1935, active in Union.

5. Education, with dates Very little formal education; has acquired education reading, novels, economics, etc.

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6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates Sailor, a writer of poems and stories. Began writing in 1934.

7. Special skills and interests

8. Community and religious activities

9. Description of informant Husky, middle height, blue-eyes.

10. Other Points gained in interview

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Saul Levitt

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace

DATE February 7, 1939

SUBJECT Maritime - FORTY FATHOMS THE AUTHOR IS FORTY FATHOMS A country lad is my degree An' few there be than ken me O But what care I how few they be, I'm welcome eye to Nannie O.

There was rain and there was wind outside but he got up and went down the flight of stairs to the lobby of the New York Hotel. The cashier stuck his head out of the little wire cage and said; "Hey, Campbell!"

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Campbell was rolling toward the door, with his head inclined forward stubbornly.

“Hey, you feller there, how about that room tonight.”

At that he turned his full, broad face around. It was faintly pink and his eyes in the midst of that broad pink coloring were very blue and sharp.

“I tha'aght you would ask me about that. Don't you know I'm going to the thee-ay-ter,” said Campbell.

“Oh, you're goin' to be funny again, aincha,” said the cashier sadly.

“I've got a qwahrter and I'm goin t' the thee-ay-ter.”

2

The 'L' running high over the Bowery shut out the winter sun for seconds during which he stood outside the door of the New York Hotel idly throwing the quarter piece in the air and catching it. A country lad is my degree An' few there be that ken me O.

Yer all along Campbell, ain't you now. Ye were born an Cape Breton Island and yer thirty-four years old and on the beach. Alders and pine docked white and if ye like it somewhere else that's all verry well if ye haven't seen Nova Scotia near the sea. A country lad is my degree An' few there be that ken me O.

A verry, verry few. “Yer no good at all without the cash,” he said aloud, “and I've got a quahrter.”

Try them shipping masters again, not that there'd be a da'am thing for him but only because a man does things like that short of going mad; and does them over again.

South Street now; coastwise boats, tankers. The lineflags blowing in the breeze. Blue and gray that one and da'am it to hell.

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When yer broke an' looking for work ye have to think about it — ye were young and ye had entheuseeasm. Lunenberg that little Dutch town. Quaint allright. Share and share alike on the fishing trip to the Newfoundland Banks; Them schooners anchored below the hills. Cod and haddock drying in the sun. When yer broke an' looking for work ye've got the time to think about it.

There were seamen all along South Street, along the piers, the shipping windows were closed but the men still stood there, near the water, more familiar than the City off westward. And he stood among them, among the land-drugged sailors, a broadfaced, husky man 3 with blue eyes anxious, feeling them around him, the enormous question mirrored in a crowd of marooned faces — When yer broke an' looking for work ye've got time to think about it.

He sat down an a crate on the edge of a pier on the East River. A tall man came over and sat down near him. They know each other and they didn't talk, just sitting there idly and yet poised, as if something might happen at any moment.

"I was just thinkin', " said Campbell, taking off his hat and running his hands through short-cropped brown hair.

"Yaaas."

"Lunenberg an' North Sidney and St. Andrews," said Campbell, with no tenderness in his voice only a bewilderment.

"Nova Scotia, yaas,"

"Uster follow the fishing trade out of Lunenberg. Then rum runnin'. We used to load up at St. Pierre's and ran along the American coast and sometimes the Canadian coast. . . ."

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The wind blew and blew at the lineflags and the crowds of seamen framed an enormous question, standing on the piers.

“Ah, there's nothing to it!” said Campbell.

“Yeas, nothing to it!”

“Got a qwahrter anyway,” said Campbell, “and maybe I'll go to the thee-ay-ter.” II

Without the bloody cash it's a da'am kind of a world.

He stood in the doorway of Redshirt Flanagan's restaurant, one rickety flight of stairs above South Street and fronting the River. The walls were faded and the big window facing the East River was clouded. There was a smell of cooking and frying fish.

4

Baked fish, vegetables and coffee.

“A qwahrter.”

It was swallowed up by the register with a musical ping.

He ate slowly; he nodded at men he know and they nodded back in that knowingness - the seamen helpless on the land - sitting here now and looking out on the River. The poker, the racing sheets, that young feller over in the corner in the pea jacket.

“Oh, wee shiverin' little beastie,” he said softly. Oh, Robert Burns. You can read Burns on your four hours off while crossing the Pacific. Does anyone know — do ye everr read it in the pay-pers? The four and four off and it's never said — the four bright stars of the Southern Cross turnin' through the night an' the man on watch wat does he think about alone on that big bloody ocean soft as silk all around an' the purrposes for company climbing up the portside and falling back with a grunt — do ye everr read it in the pay-

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pers? Not by a da'am sight. And if it's off Newfoundland gray and dirty weather freezing aloft in the Crow's Nest —

“What's the matter,” said the man near him.

“Nothing!” said Campbell, “but if I had a qwahrter I'd break the bloody!....

No one turned around. Ah, look at 'em! Do ye everr read it in the pay-pers? His eyes were small and blue and shining as he stood up. Them shipping masters I'll tear their bloody hearts out!

His eyes roved over that room where the seamen sat each alone in the common aloneness, each in reverie before the cards, the racing sheets, the fried fish, the brown tables, and / yet bonded in a wordless tension which constricted him within so that his pink 5 face flooded and his little blue eyes beamed with anger and he stood up and rolled softly toward the stairway with his head inclined stubbornly forward. III O whistle and I'll come to you, my lad, O whistle and I'll come to you, my lad; Tho' father and mother and as should gae mad, O whistle and I'll come to you, my lad.

He tapped out the rhythm softly on the table in the library. He smiled widely because New York is far from St. Andrews in Nova Scotia where an old man's deep voice sang out the words. They have come in from the farms around St. Andrews, the young people have come and there they sit, listening, while old Cameron sings out the poems softly. O whistle and I'll come to you, my lad.

Behind his beard that old Bully Cameron is smiling. The young people from the farms, through early on the short winter days, smiling at old Cameron and kind of nodding as he recites. But then New York is a long way from Nova Scotia. A sailor's life, now, what would Robert Burns have said about the lot of a sailor. Tho father and mother and as should gae mad, O whistle and I'll came to you, my lad.

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In Wellington, on the beach a girrl. But so help me, if I'da given her another look I would never have gone home again. That's the other side of the world.

If he had a qwahrter now. Burns was the man. A great lover of nacherr. Reading him on the long trips, a great lover of nacherr was Robert Burns to conclude it.

If he had a qwahrter now. There's so da'am much to think about when you're on the beach.

In Battery Park the tug whistles sounded lonely. And the ships far out, whistling. Like some baby crying for its mother. And the sailors 6 were around him, sitting on benches and tasting the northeast wind with stony mouths.

Robert Burns was a man with a great heart. Campbell sat on the bench, idly tapping, tapping a rhthm on the bench. That ISU full of gab and whatnot. And here he was. Here he was, sitting, In Sailor Town, in Sailor Town, Besides the Windswept Sea.

He was sitting here and it was cold and the seamen all a around him walking and talking. So easy in his mind The Seamen walk and Seamen talk Of what fools sailors be.

Not a poem in a litee-ra-ree way but just look at them now on the beach and no work and to listen to then boats whistling and the seamen like to sit about and talk Of Ships that sank Of men who drank And strange ports of the Sea.

That's yer seaman for ye. He wrote it down on a piece of paper.

The seamen sat on benches facing the sea. There was mist in New York harbor.

"I have something here that might appeal to seamen — not a poem in a lit-err-ra-ree way," he said, glancing around.

He read in a big, sonorous voice, rocking backwards and forwards gently.

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When he was finished they nodded at him, in a casual nodding agreement.

"It isn't exactly a poem in a lit-ee-ra-ree way," said Campbell, taking off his hat and scratching his head. His forehead furrowed; "I'd say, brothers, it was nothing more than a message to seamen to show them what they're up against in this here . . ."

7

And they nodded, looking around them. The towers ran close to the edge of the harbor, cutting the sky sharply, and the big ships came sliding in gray and purple in the misty afternoon. Everything was huge; the seamen huddled together in Battery Park fronting New York Harbor. IV

The Editor of the [Doghouse News?] was a slight, sandy-haired man who was running off a leaflet calling for a mass meeting for seamen. He stopped to read and then he looked up.

"I tellya," said the Editor, "I like it. I'm not much of a judge ye know but it's got a lot of feeling. How come you wrote it — if ye don't mind my asking."

"It's the conditions," said Campbell. "It's the conditions of the seamen that makes a man angry. I was thinking about it all day."

"We'll use it," said the Editor of the [Doghouse News?], "if we got the room. You can't do much with a fourpage mimeograph paper."

"Have ye got a qharter now," said Campbell, "seeing that I'm a poet sort of —"

"Twenty cents is what I've go on me," said the Editor.

"Verry good," said Campbell, pocketing it and starting to go out.

"What'll we put down for the author," asked the Editor.

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Campbell stood in the doorway, rubbing his broad face. "I'd say Forty Fathoms," he said. "Forty Fathoms is the author. Deep water."